

Entertainment

Angelique Rockas: bold theatre pioneer

This year marks 20 years since Angelique Rockas, a South African actress who lives in London, started the Internationalist Theatre, which presented multiracial productions of classical plays – at a time when these were the bastion of white-only casting. Although this is now standard practice, it was Rockas's theatre company that put this on the map. In honour of Women's Day *The South African* chatted to Rockas about her groundbreaking work.

You studied politics, philosophy and English literature at Wits University. How did this lead to acting?

I arrived at as an undergraduate with two driving passions: a consuming interest for a politics of justice grounded in a Christian theology – and acting, as a 'revelation of the treasures of the human soul' not as a form of exhibitionism.

My search for justice grew out of the pain I experienced when I saw the ridicule my malformed brother elicited. I became aware of the evil that is prejudice, a form of injustice.

My urge to redress this prejudice took a more social dimension during my years as a boarder at St Dominic's Convent, where the great Barbara Hogan matriculated a year later than me – though I only got acquainted with her at Wits.

The Catholic priests and nuns led by example, and were prepared to sacrifice their lives for a non-Marxist liberation theology. In matric I impressed with a performance in a tableau called *Taboo* and it was suggested I attend drama school.

So I arrived at Wits politicised, with a hidden passion for drama – a profession frowned on by the conservative immigrant Greek community in which I grew up.

There were rumblings of unrest. *Sizwe Banzi* was being performed on campus, Nadine

School, where one of my classmates was the inimitable Reza de Wet, a liberal intellectual who punctured the cliché that Afrikaners were racists and bigots.

Cape Town Drama School had the moral vision to take on students of other races, such as Vincent Ibrahim, who became very successful in the UK.

Why did you leave South Africa?

At the end of my course I realised there was no place for me in South Africa because I found it difficult to function in a society that considered 75 percent of the population inferior, that my community frowned on

me as an actress, and my beliefs for a non-racial society now incorporated a fight for the equality of women – an anathema to my conservative Greek community. I did not want to spend my life apologising for who I was.

How did the Internationalist Theatre begin?

The delusion many visitors to the UK bring is that it is the most politically advanced and civilised country in the world. It was a shock to discover it is not. There is prejudice against foreigners and people of colour.

I worked for a Marxist Greek Cypriot theatre company in London, where issues of prejudice against immigrants, the poor and illiterate were

Empowered by my ability as a producer I could begin to create theatre that would really break taboos. Our first play in 1981 was Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, a prophetic choice, set in Paris in turmoil, just as London was being torched during the Brixton riots, an explosion of racial tensions that had been simmering for some time. I insisted on casting a Caribbean actress to play the lead, Irma the Madam of the Brothel.

The ground-breaking production of the company, and the point at which the cross-cultural casting began to bite, was Brecht's anti-war play *Mother Courage*. Just one comment in a review by critic Malcolm Hay jolted us into the realisation that we were making history: Why is a Pakistani actor playing the Pastor?

The breaking of casting clichés also broke boundaries. A short, Latin-looking actress like me playing classical roles such as Miss Julie, and playing them well, made casting directors uncomfortable. It was unheard of that a short, dark-haired actress of Greek temperament could play the aristocratic Miss Julie. Not beautiful or tall enough etc. It proved one of the best productions of *Miss Julie* ever seen in London.

What was the wider impact of Internationalist Theatre?

The seriousness with which the productions were presented encouraged actors of non Anglo-Saxon origin to be bold; present themselves as artists first.

Other companies started copying our casting policies. Previously there were black companies doing black-themed plays, Indian companies



written with roles for a multiracial cast.

The question is whether the current arts establishment is willing to produce a Shakespeare, Brecht, Gorky with a multiracial cast. Apparently these types of dramas in the



REVIEW OF ANGELIQUE ROCKAS'S PERFORMANCE OF MISS JULIE IN THE
INTERNATIONALIST THEATRE PRODUCTION, LONDON JANUARY 1984

BY JO STANLEY, 'MORNING STAR'

"..the title role has been played by infuriatingly unreal women who have done little to suggest the huge dimensions of the character which Angelique Rockas does here"

"EVERY MAJOR HUMAN CONFLICT, AND AT GREAT DEPTH, IS EXPLORED IN THIS IMPORTANT DRAMA: CLASS, SEX, RELIGION, AMBITION.

AND MS ROCKAS'S PERFORMANCE ADDS STILL FURTHER TO THE PROFUNDITY AND POWER OF IT WITH HER MOST ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE"

Profound conflict

Miss Julie (Sir Richard Steele). STRINDBERG wrote this classic drama very much not in sympathy with Miss Julie, the headstrong daughter of a 19th-century women's rights campaigner and a Scandinavian landowner.

He loathed what he called such "man-hating half-women." And in past productions, the title role has been played by infuriatingly unreal women who have done little to suggest the huge dimensions of the character which Angelique Rockas does here.

It was a daring bit of self-casting (Ms Rockas is the leading light in the Internationalist Theatre which presented this play). And part of the fascination of the evening was wondering if this husky-voiced, power-

ful performer could bring it off.

She did; superbly. And so did Garry Cooper as Jean, the valet.

After they have foolishly ended up making love, his servility, his self-conscious and careful demeanour are swept away. He becomes a snarling, raging, almost fascist master who gains his power from Miss Julie's despair at the implications of what she has done.

So she rages at Jean and tells him she longs to kill him bloodily, satisfyingly. She reasserts all her old power.

Every major human conflict, and at great depth, is explored in this important drama: class, sex, religion, ambition. And Ms. Rockas' performance adds still further to the profundity and power of it with her most original performance.

Jo Stanley